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ABSTRACT

"Muddiness" in student writing can be eliminated, and students can learn to write with clarity, through the employment of a 1-3-3-3-1 pattern: one opening sentence, three paragraphs of three sentences each, and one closing sentence. To this basic pattern, the concept of key words may be added to help students develop a focus for each piece of writing. Students first identify the key word in the opening sentence, which should determine the basic direction of the composition, and they also choose a key word that relates to the content of each of the paragraphs. They can then check to see if each sentence in each paragraph relates to its key word and to see if the paragraphs and the closing sentence relate to the key word in the opening sentence. Students can be taught to grade their own work on the basis of how well it follows the basic pattern; in this way, students gain some control over the grading of their work. Checking each other's work also helps students develop confidence and knowledge. (GW)

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A Key to Clarity -

Some Variations on a Slide-Tape Extravaganza [1]

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I WANT YOU

Who, me?

What for?

To clear up the mud.

What mud?

And anyway, what does an English teacher have to do with clearing it up?

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Ask President Carter. He knows where the mud is. It's on the written page. It's the gobbledygook in office memos, apartment leases, insurance policies, in business, university, and government reports. And it's been there a long time.

President Roosevelt encountered it during his administration. The following is an actual order concerning blackouts. Beneath it is FDR's version:

> Such preparations shall be made as will completely obscure all Federal buildings and non Federal buildings occupied by the Federal Government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of internal or external illumination. Such obscuration may be obtained either by blackout construction or by terminating the illumination. This will of course require that in building areas in which production must continue during a blackout, construction must be provided that internal illumination may continue. Other areas, whether or not occupied by personnel, may be obscured by terminating the illumination.

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[1] This paper was originally a slide-tape presentation given at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Kansas City, April 1, 1977.

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All Federal buildings permanent or temporary must be darkened completely during an air raid, either by turning out the lights or hanging something across the windows.

Carter wants to continue the war that hasn't yet been won--the war for clarity. He's demanded that all government officials sign each document they write and has required that no memo go longer than a page. Carter's working on the government front. And he needs you to help the kids in the classroom - who some day will be writing the memos, the leases, the policies, the reports. The country needs you.

VARIATIONS ON "THE MARINES' SONG"

1) From the halls of Penn and Delaware
To the seminars of Berkeley
We will fight our country's battles
In the war for clarity.

2) First we fight to write with freedom
Then to keep our message clear
And we're proud to bear the titles
of teachers kids don't fear.

But what do kids have to fear?

They fear the pen and paper, the written word, the confusion surrounding them. They're not sure how to put it all together. And this confusion in the mind leads to the muddy thoughts on paper.

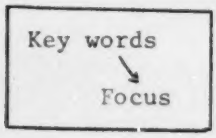
Our job is to teach students how to order the chaos, how to eliminate the mud, how to communicate.

So what can we do right here and now?
How do we perform a miracle on mud?
What's the first thing we need?

We need a formula to dispel the fear. We need a pattern of organization that's simple and graspable.

One way to start is with a basic 1-3-3-3-1 pattern: one opening sentence, three paragraphs of three sentences each, one closing sentence.

Then, to this basic pattern the concept of key words can be added. Key words define, limit, and direct thoughts. They help a student focus, zero in. For example, a student who wants to tell how the Philadelphia Eagles bring dejection into town, must keep the key word, dejection, in mind. This way he is less inclined to talk about the great spirit of the crowd, the old friends he met, and the good time he had with his girlfriend.



Topic sentence:
The Philadelphia Eagles bring dejection into town.

Note:
It is important to have the student underline the word to remind him of the focus.

With this sense of focus for his composition, the student can then begin to develop the focus of each paragraph. He may decide to write about the different sensations he had at the game. One possibility then, would be to choose one sense for each paragraph. (The important thing here is that the key word be written in the margin. Students otherwise are inclined to forget just what it was they set out to say.)

Sample:

The Philadelphia Eagles bring dejection into town. 1

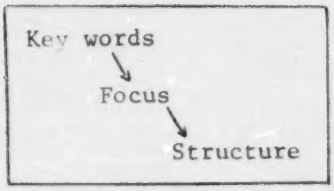
sights - I am watching the game end. I see stunned people leave the stadium. I see the dejected Eagles walk slowly to the locker room as the St. Louis Cardinals jump with the joy of victory. 3

sounds - At first I hear only silence. But then I hear people muttering under their breaths. And I can imagine the cry of the disappointed Eagles. 3

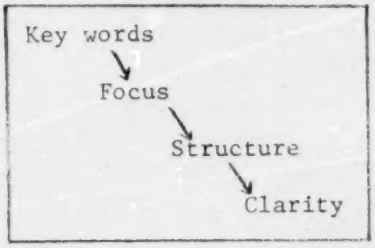
smells - The odor of garbage lingers. The great smell of hot dogs and popcorn has gone stale. The smell of a perspiring angry crowd leaves the stadium. 3

It's the fourteen point loss that's so hard to take. 1

With the key words in the margin, the student can then follow the simple procedure sketched above. He can check to see if each sentence in each paragraph relates to its key word, and to see if each paragraph and its corresponding key word relates to the dejection he speaks of in his opening sentence. Though the paragraphs have weaknesses, they are at least focused. And when the student is writing, as each focused paragraph builds upon the other, a stable structure begins to emerge.



The structure is complete and a clear statement is made when the student establishes a stable relationship between his opening and closing sentences.



In contrast, a student who has not followed the rules ends up with an unclear, unfocused statement.

Sample:

When I took my sister to the Eagles game, the little brat wouldn't stop bothering me until it was over.

Just as we arrived, Tom Brookshire, the broadcaster, was announcing the players. We could hear all the boos and hisses of the fans. My sister was listening to another sound - the cry of the popcorn man.

While we were watching the game we could smell the aroma of popcorn and hotdogs. We could also smell the odor of cigarette and cigar smoke. There was also the scent of the crisp November air.

As the game went on we watched the players running, catching, and throwing. The scoreboard showed the score of the game and other games in the league. During the half-time festivities we watched the colorful bands marching up and down the field.

The Eagles lost the game 17-3 to the St. Louis Cardinals.

This student, as he develops the key word of each paragraph, forgets the key word which is supposed to be directing his composition. The first paragraph

on sounds is acceptable. However, in the next two paragraphs, though the student deals with smells and sights, he fails to relate them to his controlling key word. And the student's concluding statement is irrelevant.

This student is perhaps just careless. For if he knows the rules, which are simple enough, he can easily detect his own errors. The basic pattern is one he can easily grasp. He can see it in front of him on one page. And he can clearly see what's expected of him and what, in this case, he has failed to do.

In addition, if the teacher has made it clear that no one can receive a passing grade without following the minimum standards, then the student can go a step further. He can put a grade on his own paper. Since the latter student got one paragraph right, he may be generous and give himself a D. But he knows he can go no higher. And though he has not passed, he does not experience the often accompanying frustration of not knowing why. He knows exactly why. And knowing gives him confidence as well as control.

Giving the student a certain amount of control is a good way of getting past the "he-gave-me" syndrome. No "hard" teacher has given that mysterious D. The grade here is determined by objective rules. And both teacher and student know the criteria.

For class activity students can practice using the criteria in marking each other's papers. And the more they do, the more confidence and knowledge they'll gain.

With a little practice a student can look at this paragraph and quickly detect one major problem.

> I learned different styles and patterns in writing. I learned discipline in trying to fit my ideas into these patterns. Discipline is essential to conform to without losing freedom of expression.

The student will probably decide that discipline is the key word and conclude that the first sentence has no place in the paragraph. He may suggest that a separate paragraph be written explaining the different styles and patterns.

A student who is trained to think in terms of key words could look at this next paragraph and immediately realize it is unacceptable.

> I learned the basics of good writing. I learned to read beyond the words in a story and to seek some inner meaning. I feel also and probably most important, that I gained confidence that I can indeed write an effective paper.

The student editing this paper may write, "Is this paragraph about the basics of good writing, the inner meaning of stories, or confidence? Your paragraph needs a key word, a focus."

Editing other papers helps students realize what's expected. It makes the job of writing easier for them. And student editing makes your job easier too. First, the papers have initial corrections. Second, the students, as they look for clear statements from their classmates, will look for clear statements from themselves. And a student who's interested in clear writing is a welcome to a hard-working teacher. At least the teacher won't be sitting up late trying to deal with confusion, a dozen different ideas in the same paragraph. But if the confusion is there it must be dealt with. Or else it

multiplies. A simple sentence can grow, as we have seen, into an elaborate production, into absurd and obscure directions on terminating illumination.

Yes, Uncle Sam needs you to teach clarity. Because clarity communicates. Students who learn it will make everyone's life easier.

Just think. Think what things could be like if more people were interested in clarity. You could finish grading papers in half the time. You could sleep or watch Masterpiece Theater instead. You could understand your insurance policy . . . or your mother-in-law. Or you could finish assembling those Christmas toys before dawn.

Aren't you worth it?